

CHAPTER 43

CAMILLO

FOUR HOURS EARLIER

“What’s so interesting on your phone, Millo?” Marco asks.

“What?”

But before I can say anything else, Alessio chips in. “He’s probably watching some por—ow, fuck!”

I raise my brow at my family gathered around the table for lunch. Beside me, the two empty seats remain, delivering an uneasy reminder that they’re gone. Two people who mean the fucking world to me. Two people who wrapped themselves so completely around my heart that, with them gone, I feel like I’ve lost a part of me.

“You haven’t looked up from your phone since you sat down,” Marco says.

“Something we should know?” Alessio chimes in.

My eyes slide to those empty places.

“Have you...tried to talk to her?” Juliana asks.

Following the funeral and the fuck up I made, I’ve spent the last week cleaning it up. Harold Covington, the asshole I punched at the funeral, made good on his word and pulled out all the stops in his attempts to get back at me.

He used every underhanded tactic in the book, but he forgot who I was and what power I carry in this city. The news of the scandal that suddenly engulfed his hedge fund brought a little satisfaction to me. Served him fucking right for running his mouth about my woman. But it didn’t fix things between Rosa and me. Not until her phone call twenty minutes ago.

When I spoke to her, relief I didn’t deserve to feel had pumped through me. It wasn’t a fix. I wasn’t sure I could fix it. But fuck, I wanted to try.

“She called me just before lunch.”

“And?” Cate asks eagerly.

“And I talked to her.”

A round of eye rolls.

“Well, what did she say?” Juliana says.

“And what did you say?” Alessio adds.

“And are they coming back soon?” Cate asks.

“Let him talk,” Marco orders over the rim of his glass.

“She said...this afternoon, they’ll be back.”

I don’t miss the way Marco’s eyes meet mine. I can read the silent question on his face without even trying: Once she’s back, is she staying for good?

I shrug in answer. I don’t know, but I sure as fuck hope so. Inside me, the constant doubts claw each flare of hope into ribbons. It’s killing me. I know that I have to talk to her properly once I’ve brought her back to the mansion.

“Good,” Alessio comments. “It’s not the same without her.”

“You just miss her cooking,” Cate laughs at her husband.

“We all do,” Marco adds.

God, do I miss her cooking. But it’s more than that. It’s the sound of her humming in the kitchen. The way she looks when she’s relaxed and having fun. The way she dances as she cooks. I just miss her. Her smell. Her laugh. Her shy smile. The way she blushes at the smallest compliment. The way she stares at me like she can’t believe I’m real.

“I hope you manage to work things out,” Juliana says softly.

I nod, gazing back down at my phone, my eyes looking at the photo of Rosa, Ethan, and me, again and again, wondering if we’ll ever be that happy again.

The last four hours since Rosa called me have lasted an eternity, and each one has made me even more fucking nervous. I've gone so far as to clean my room, picking up all the clothes and car magazines that dotted the floor, plus put fresh sheets on the bed. Alessio had a field day while watching me at work.

But sitting here in the lounge, waiting until it's time to leave and trying to act like I'm not about to throw up, is harder than I thought.

"Stop looking at the clock." Juliana grins from where she lounges, reading a book. "Won't make it go faster."

"Don't you have something to do?"

"Nope." She pops the 'p' at the end, giving me a wide smile.

I mutter a curse under my breath. "Can you all wait somewhere else, then?"

"Someone needs to make sure you don't fuck it up between now and when you pick her up," Marco says, fiddling with the buttons on his shirt sleeve.

I roll my eyes. "Your confidence in me is heartwarming, really. I'm touched. But I've got this. So, please, can you kindly fuck off?"

Marco looks at me carefully. "Are you sure, Millo? I cleared my diary for this afternoon so that I could drive you to the Davis mansion."

I give him a grateful nod. "Thanks, but I'm sure."

Marco pulls his wife up, and they make to leave. "Okay, we'll find something else to do. But just call if you need me."

Juliana gives my shoulder a quick squeeze as she passes, and I listen as they make their way upstairs—no doubt to fuck.

The sudden emptiness of the room is unbearable. I drag a hand through my hair, pulling it up, then down, then back up before I start to pace the room.

The paperwork from our lawyer sits on the table. It's not ironclad, but it's a start, and that's all that matters. She asked me to find another way...to be the better man. And I'm trying.

Grayden might have power through his wealth, but if there's anything I've learned over the last few days, I'm going to stop at nothing to show him what genuine power looks like.

At 4 p.m., I pull up outside the Davis mansion and make my way inside. A maid directs me to where everyone is.

I stride into the garden, rubbing at my jaw, my heart lurching into my throat. Wiping my palms on my jeans, I try to will myself to calm the fuck down. Panic swells through my body, and I feel like I've lost every brain cell I own.

Consulting the seating plan, I find who I'm looking for. And when I see Rosa and Ethan, I lose the ability to breathe.

Her beautiful eyes lock onto me. I freeze mid step. Every muscle seizes up, and I forget how to function. The white noise in my brain is drowning me. And also anger—because I can't help but notice that Rosa and Ethan have been seated in the furthest corner, out of the way as if her mother is ashamed of them.

“Fuck it,” I mutter, striding toward her. As she takes a few steps forward, I pull her close to me, any resolve to let her dictate this flying out the window.

The smell of her, roses and sweetness, fills my nose and every empty part of my body that's been bleeding since the funeral. It feels like fucking home.

I look down at her. Her chest labors in the T-shirt she's wearing—my T-shirt—with each second that passes.

My hand cups her cheek, thumb stroking her smooth skin. So much for taking it slow. “I've missed you... Both of you.”

“Are we still in trouble?” a voice pipes up from lower down.

A startled chuckle leaves me as I kneel. Ethan stands tucked against Rosa's leg. He looks smaller than he is, different. My chest pounds with anger. What the fuck did they do to my boy? “You weren't ever in trouble, buddy.”

“But—”

“I messed up, Ethan. I did something wrong. Not you or your mom. I didn't know how to handle everything. I need to work on that. And I'm going to work on it—for you and for your mom. So, it's on me. And I'm sorry.” I look up at Rosa. “I'm really

sorry. My home is your home. And it's been your home for a while now. If you want it..."

Rosa's sharp intake of air has me stilling. Have I already messed this up? Have I already overstepped?

Shit. Shit. Okay. Backtrack. I can fix this. "What I mean is... I mean you guys are, uh..." I take a deep breath, keeping my gaze fixed on Rosa. This is not going as I planned. Words aren't a strong suit of mine.

But I need her, them both, to know just what I feel like without them. And that what I need is them. "If you want to stay with me forever, you can. Please stay."

"Can...we really stay?" The hesitancy of Ethan's question breaks my heart.

Both of us look up at Rosa.

And I can see the fresh sheen of tears in her eyes as she nods, making Ethan relax, his small body crumbling a little on itself with relief.

I smile widely at them both.

And then she reaches up on her tiptoes and kisses me, right there in front of everyone. It's long, lingering, and needy. And we don't stop until a nasal voice interrupts us. "What in God's name is the meaning of this, Rosa?" her mother hisses, marching up to us with Reagan on her heels.

Rosa lifts her chin up. "Ethan and I are going home now—with Camillo."

Cyndie's face turns practically purple.

"I hope you're not serious, and this is your stupid idea of a joke," Reagan snaps.

Rosa looks them in the eye. "Camillo has shown me more kindness and respect in the short time I've been with him than either of you have shown me in my entire lifetime." Her voice is quiet yet firm. "I'm not saying this to hurt you. Because it hurts me even more to say this—to have to admit aloud that you haven't seen me as being worthy of your love and kindness."

"What would a barbarian like him know about kindness?" Cyndie splutters.

“He knows a lot. He’s brought Ethan out of his shell, he’s brought me out of my constant state of fear, and he doesn’t disapprove or criticize at every turn. He makes me feel that I’m good enough. Like I matter. Like I’m not invisible.”

"You're being utterly ridiculous."

“No, I’m not.” I can tell that Rosa can hardly believe that she’s actually saying all this to her family. And as I listen to her words, I’m so fucking proud of her. “I want to be with people who’ll support me, stand up for me, love me. I want to be around people who’ll build me up rather than tear me down. Criticism and disapproving comments from strangers is bad enough, but from my own family—from the people who are supposed to love me despite anything—it cuts me to the core and makes me want to cry out from the pain of it. You’ve always made me feel like I’m not good enough. But I’m telling you right now that I am. I’m good enough. I’m not the problem. The problem is your shallows standards and your constant obsession over appearance and reputation.”

“We’ve done everything for you,” Cyndie spits.

"Everything for me? You’ve ignored me, belittled me, and made me feel like nothing. You never supported me when things became horrendous and dangerous with Grayden. Every time I’ve needed you, you’ve made me feel like a burden."

Reagan rolls her beady eyes. "Stop being so dramatic."

Rosa takes a deep breath. “I’m not being dramatic. I’m communicating my feelings and hurt to you. I’ve tried to be a good daughter and a loyal sister, but it’s time for me to let go and move on with my life. It’s time for me to put myself first for once—and put my son first. He deserves that. I deserve that.”

Rosa starts to walk away.

“You stupid girl, Rosa. You can’t—”

But before Cyndie can speak any further, I have to say something to this awful woman. “Nobody puts Rosa or my boy in the corner—ever,” I growl in a low, dangerous voice.

Cyndie’s mouth opens and closes like a goldfish while Reagan can only stare wide-eyed at me.

And without another word, I scoop Ethan into my arms and lace Rosa's fingers with mine, leading them to my car—and taking them home with me.

“C’mon, let’s go play.” Ethan tugs my hand and Rosa’s as soon as we arrive back at the Marchiano estate.

“Actually, buddy, can I talk with your mom for a bit? Why don’t you head into the playroom and find us a game to play for after?”

His little arms cross over his chest, and for a blink of an eye, I see my posture and expression mirrored at me. “Okay, Uncle Millo. But not too long.”

“Promise.”

Once he’s out of earshot, I rise and meet Rosa’s eyes. “I owe you an apology. A big one.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I do.” I lick my lips. “How I acted at the funeral, and what I did there. And in front of Ethan.” I can’t look her in the eye as a reminder of her horrified expression fills my mind. “I fucked up. Big time.”

“Camillo…”

“Please, let me finish, Rosa.” I’m almost begging her. I’m tempted to drop to my knees and plead with her just to make sure that she really does stay for good.

I rehearsed the whole goddamn speech in my room, but now that I’m face to face with her, I can’t remember a damn word of it.

“I…” I clear my throat, scrubbing my jaw. “It won’t happen again. You deserve someone who isn’t a wild beast at the drop of a hat, especially in front of Ethan. Who doesn’t lose his temper and pummel rich assholes. I know that… I just…” Fuck, this is harder than I want to admit.

But that ache in my chest, the one that’s ripping me apart from the inside out at the idea of her walking back out that door, is killing me little by little.

I drop my eyes. “I’m not the best man…or even a good one. I might never be. But God, do I want to be it for you. It’s not in me to change easily. I’m the way I am

because I need to be. My family depends on me being able to do what I do. But with you, Rosa, it's different. It's always been different. I don't want to be the brute or thug when you're around. I want to be the man you see. I sure as fuck don't want people gossiping about me or you. And I don't want people hurting you or making you doubt yourself just because they've seen you with me."

Rosa steps closer to me, her head tilting back to meet my gaze.

I cup her face in my hands. "All the things people say about me. All the things I've done... I don't want you to be ashamed of me. Or hurt. Or worse." But I'm fucking selfish. "A better man would let you slip away. Let you live a life where you're safe and away from danger. A better man wouldn't be selfish like me. He wouldn't do the things I do and call it love. Because that's what this is. Love..."

I haven't ever admitted it out loud before.

"Rosa, my obsessive need to be near you, with you, in you...it's all because I'm in love with you."

"I want to keep you here. With me. Because this is your home as much as it is mine. Because I—" The words are thick in my throat. Love. It's not a word I thought I'd ever say. When it happened, I'm not sure I know.

The moment I laid eyes on her in that fucking wedding dress perhaps, but the fact remains that my heart is in her hands even if she rejects me. Even if she decides to pack up her things and leave.

"My heart is yours, Rosa. I'm yours. I..."

"Camillo." Rosa's soft voice draws my attention back to her.

"Yes, beautiful?"

Her lip twitches at the corner. "Can I say something now?"

There's still so much I have to tell her. Still so much I need to explain or try to explain. But I nod, letting her go.

"Good." A deep breath leaves her.

I tense, bracing for the news she's going to tell me. Every bone in my body is telling me to run. To put as much distance between Rosa and me as possible. Because a man like me doesn't deserve someone like her. Because this weakness she causes in me

scares the absolute shit out of me. I've built myself to be a man of power. Of strength. But I would crumble to my knees just to hear her say she feels the same way I do.

My heart thunders in my chest as I wait for her to continue, acutely aware that her fingers are curling around the soft cotton of my T-shirt. Their slight tremble is the only thing telling me she's nervous or scared.

Her eyes bounce around the place. "I leave for a few days, and this place is just...well, it's a mess."

Confusion knits my brows. "Huh?"

"Clearly, you guys need a maid. So, I've decided Ethan and I are going to stay."

I blink. Searching her eyes, I wait for her to fill in the rest of that statement. It's incomplete. She'll stay until when? For how long?

"If you'll still have me? Have us?" Her voice trembles, soft and unsure.

"For how long?" The words scrape out of my throat. If this is just a temporary thing, I don't think I'll survive.

"There has to be a limit?"

"No, of course there doesn't. I just..." I rub the back of my neck. "You said you wouldn't need the job here anymore."

"I don't." Her honesty feels like a sucker punch. How have I messed this up so badly? "When I said that, I just meant I didn't need you to pay me for my work. But this is my home now, you said so yourself. Juliana, Cate, all the kids, Alessio, even Marco. And you—especially you. You're home. This is our home." And I should have stuck up for you more in front of my family. I shouldn't have let them speak to you like that or throw you out. I'm so sorry, Camillo. I need to start putting first the people who matter to me—you and Ethan. And I've got to let go of the people who won't ever change or accept me for the person I am."

"I should have answered your text, Rosa. But what about the rest of it? The funeral? The embarrassment I caused you?"

"We can embarrass my family together. I'm great at it." Her lip twitches again, and I see a soft sheen of tears in her eyes. "I don't condone violence. But I understand why

you did it. You want to protect your family. You want to protect us. How can I fault you for that?”

“If I told you what I’ve done in the past, you’d take off for the hills and never look back. But I’m trying here. For you and for Ethan.”

“You are when it matters, Camillo.” And that smile I’ve been craving so much over the last few days graces her gorgeous lips.

This woman. Whatever I’ve done to deserve even a scrap of her heart, I’ll forever be thankful.

“I really am sorry, Rosa.” I rest my forehead against her, breathing in her scent once more. “I’m working on things. I’ve finally realized that not everything has to be solved with fists and blood.” I swallow the lump in my throat that threatens to choke me. “And I want to prove it to you right now—prove that I’m trying to be a better man.”

I pull away gently, leading her toward the table and nodding to the stack of papers there.

“What’s that?”

“Read it.”

Rosa gingerly picks up the packet and flips through it. Her face contorts as her brows pucker downward. “Camillo, is this…”

“I told you I’d find another way.” I clear my throat. “While you were with your family, I was doing this. Our lawyers are the best in Chicago. They know a specialist who helps people escape abusive situations, and she’s agreed to help on the case. We’ve been working on it already, and we have more than enough leverage to ensure that you’ll stay safe and that Grayden can’t take Ethan from you—ever. He has money, probably much more than what your father left you, but so do we, and I can assure you that he’ll run out before we ever do.”

“I don’t know what to say…”

“You can look it over later. I included our lawyer’s direct line and the specialist’s number so that you can speak to them and ask questions. Her assistant apparently went through something similar, so she’s also listed in case you want to speak to someone who’s been in the same boat as you’re in now.”

“Why did you go to all this trouble?”

“You know why.” I hope.

She stares at me, searching my face for something.

“I’m in. I’m all in, baby. With you. With Ethan.” I hold her gaze, hoping I appear calmer than I feel. My heart is pounding in my ribcage like it’s trying to break free of my chest, as though it wants to make a run for it before Rosa can crack it open more than she already has. “I’m not good at this. In fact, I think you know I’m terrible at all this...”

Emotions are a weakness I’ve always thought I couldn’t afford. Weakness gets people killed in my line of work. It makes them exploitable. But they’re also the reason I’d wage a war on every fucking rich asshole in this city who utters a word against anyone I care about. And I realize now that these emotions that strangle me, that drag me under, don’t make me weak when it matters. They give me strength.

“For you, Rosa, I’d do the impossible if you asked me to. I meant what I said when I told you I’d never be a good enough man. I’m who I am. But for you? For you, I’m trying to be this version you see.”

The room is still. Anxiety bubbles through me as I worry I’ve said too much. She’s just back—but have I already pushed her away again?

I’ve opened my heart and left it beating and bleeding at her feet. Is she going to kick it away? I can’t look at her...

She sniffs.

“Rosa?” I lift my gaze once more.

She wipes at her eyes, smearing whatever makeup she had on. No doubt another stupid requirement for her fucking family. Another deep breath, and she holds my eye. “Thank you. That’s what I want to say to you. And I can never say that enough.”

“You’re thanking me?”

She steps closer to me, cupping my cheek with her hand. In this position, we’re eye to eye, and her beautiful honey brown eyes glisten. “I am. Thank you for that.” She nods to the documents. “And for saving me. You don’t have to try to be some version you think I see. You already are the man I want.”

“I’m not.”

“You are.” Tears cling to her lashes, and her bottom lip wobbles.

Softly, I brush them away with the pad of my finger. “I’m not. Don’t say that, Rosa. We both know I’m not.”

“Yes, you are,” she insists. “You’ve done nothing but show me and my son kindness. You’ve done everything you can to make me fall in love with you when I was nothing. Why else would you do all that, find a way for me to be free from Grayden, give us a home and a family, if you weren’t a good man?”

I press my forehead to hers and sigh.

“You protect your family, Camillo. You’d do anything to keep them safe, and we were lucky enough to make that cut.”

My heart aches with the weight of it all. With the words I’ve longed to hear from someone—and with my love for her. And my fear that I’m not good enough for her crumbles as I listen to her.

“You might be a monster to everyone else, Camillo. But to me, you’re a guardian angel.”

“You’re too good for me.”

Her hand circles my neck, and I close my eyes, clinging to her. I’m drowning, and she’s my lifeline. Whatever I did in life to deserve this woman, I wish I’d done it sooner.

“I’m all in, Camillo. If you want me, want us, we’re yours.”

“Mean it?”

“Yes.”

The soft way she looks at me cracks me in half. Cupping her cheek, I pull her lips to me, and for the first time in God knows too long, I feel like I’m finally home.

She sighs against my lips, and I angle her head, deepening the kiss. Her fingers curl into the fabric at my shoulders before sliding into the roots of my hair.

If we had more time, I'd take her right here and now. I'd show her just what my words mean. But anyone could walk in, and worse yet, we're keeping Ethan waiting.

"Rosa," I murmur against her lips as I slowly pull back.

That shy smile plays at her lips. "I like how you say my name."

I grin. There's that spark I've missed. One I thought for sure was snuffed out forever.

Her soft laugh is like nothing I've experienced. Euphoria and bliss are all wrapped together in some drug I can't quit.

My hands slide over the back of her thighs, tugging her closer into my body. "I should welcome you home officially, but I think Ethan might get a little suspicious if we disappear.

"Later?" she says.

"As soon as he's down for a nap, beautiful, I'm going to worship you like you deserve."

The shiver that rides through her makes me strain against my zipper. Lacing our fingers, I will myself to calm the fuck down. Without warning, I scoop her up into my arms to carry her into the lounge where Ethan is waiting for us. Her squeal of surprise vibrates against my chest. "I can walk. You don't have to..."

"I know. I want to. I've missed having you in my arms."

Her sigh brushes against my neck, and I drop my lips to her forehead. And nestled into my arms, it feels like my world has righted itself back on its axis...